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Dickens's London

Wolfreys, Julian

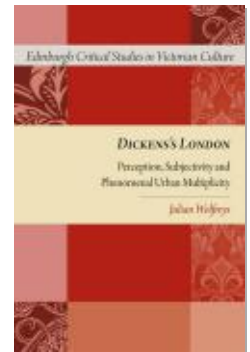
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Life and Death • Snow Hill, the Saracen's Head, Smithfield, Saint James's Parish, Saint Sepulchre's Church

Nicholas Nickleby

Snow Hill! What kind of place can the quiet town's-people who see the words emblazoned in all the legibility of gilt letters and dark shading on the north-country coaches, take Snow Hill to be? All people have some undefined and shadowy notion of a place whose name is frequently before their eyes or often in their ears, and what a vast number of random ideas there must be perpetually floating about, regarding this same Snow Hill. The name is such a good one. Snow Hill—Snow Hill too, coupled with a Saracen's Head: picturing to us a double association of ideas, something stern and rugged. A bleak desolate tract of country, open to piercing blasts and fierce wintery storms—a dark, cold, and gloomy heath, lonely by day, and scarcely to be thought of by honest folks at night—a place where solitary wayfarers shun, and where desperate robbers congregate;—this, or something like this, we imagine must be the prevalent notion of Snow Hill in those remote and rustic parts, through which the Saracen's Head, like some grim apparition, rushes each day and night with mysterious and ghost-like punctuality, holding its swift and heading course in all weathers, and seeming to bid defiance to the very elements themselves.

The reality is rather different, but by no means to be despised notwithstanding. There, at the very core of London, in the heart of its business and animation, in the midst of a whirl of noise and motion: stemming as it were the giant currents of life that flow ceaselessly on from different quarters, and meet beneath its walls, stands Newgate; and in that crowded street on which it frowns so darkly—within a few feet of the squalid, tottering houses—upon that very spot on which the vendors of soup and fish and damaged fruit are now plying their trades—scores of human beings, amidst a roar of sounds to which even the tumult of the great city is as nothing, four, six, or eight strong men at a time, have been hurried violently and swiftly from the world, when the scene has been rendered frightful with excess of human life; when curious eyes have glared from casement, and house-top, and wall and pillar, and when, in the mass of white and upturned faces, the dying wretch, in his all-comprehensive look of agony, has met not one—not one—that bore the impress of pity or compassion.

Near to the jail, and by consequence near to Smithfield also, and the Compter and the bustle and noise of the city; and just on that particular part

of Snow Hill where omnibus horses going eastwards seriously think of falling down on purpose, and where horses in hackney cabriolets going westwards not unfrequently fall by accident, is the coachyard of the Saracen's Head Inn, its portal guarded by two Saracen's heads and shoulders, which it was once the pride and the glory of the choice spirits of this metropolis to pull down at night, but which have for some time remained in undisturbed tranquillity; possibly because this species of humour is now confined to Saint James's parish, where door-knockers are preferred, as being more portable, and bell-wires esteemed as convenient tooth-picks. Whether this be the reason or not, there they are, frowning upon you from each side of the gateway, and the inn itself, garnished with another Saracen's Head, frowns upon you from the top of the yard; while from the door of the hind boot of all the red coaches that are standing therein, there glares a small Saracen's Head with a twin expression to the large Saracen's Heads below, so that the general appearance of the pile is of the Saracenic order.

When you walk up this yard, you will see the booking-office on your left, and the tower of Saint Sepulchre's church darting abruptly up into the sky on your right, and a gallery of bedrooms on both sides. Just before you, you will observe a long window with the words 'coffee-room' legibly painted above it . . . (NN 88-90)